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AUTHOR Cox, Mary-Lorrainé L.; Malabonga, Valerie
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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the changes in English and Spanish oral expression and comprehension skills of 18 male and 25 female Spanish-speaking Latino children attending a preschool that emphasized English language learning but supported maintenance of Spanish skills. For comparison purposes, the English skills of African American children (n=16 boys, 15 girls) attending the same school were also assessed at the end of the year. To test oral expression, a story-telling measure normed on Latino children was used. To assess comprehension skills, children were read stories in English (non-Latino children) or in English and Spanish (Latino children), and the children were individually asked multiple-choice questions. Results show significant improvement in the English expression scores of the Spanish-speaking children. The African American children scored significantly higher on the English expression measure. The Spanish expression scores of the Latino children increased, but not significantly. English comprehension scores, which were similar for Spanish-speakers and African Americans, did not increase significantly for the Spanish-speaking students. Spanish comprehension scores declined slightly but not significantly. Implications for preschool environment and instruction are discussed. (Contains nine references.) (MSE)

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Improvements in the English- and Spanish- Language Expression and Comprehension of Latino Preschoolers

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Valerie Malabonga and Mary-Lorraine L. Cox

Department of Psychology, George Mason University

Fairfax, VA, 22030

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Abstract

Within one school year, 43 Spanish-speaking, Latino preschoolers achieved a significant improvement in their English oral expression while attending a preschool that emphasized English-learning but supported Spanish-speaking. At year's end, the English comprehension of 31 English-speaking, African-American pupils attending the same preschool was also measured and found comparable to that of the Latino preschoolers.

Introduction

In recent years, preschools in the United States have become more ethnically and linguistically diverse. Kagan and Garcia (1991) estimate that there will be 5.2 million preschoolers who speak a language other than English at home by the year 2000. Therefore, one of the challenges faced by preschool educators is to provide the best elementary-school preparation for such a diverse student body. Policy makers, researchers and educators often disagree on how this task can be accomplished. Some believe that it is more beneficial to educate children in their first language during preschool and introduce English after these

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children have attained a solid cognitive foundation in their first language (Collier, 1995; Wong-Fillmore, 1991); on the other hand, others claim that introducing English as early as possible in the child's education will give children an academic "head start" (English for the Children, 1997). However, very few studies have focused on children's language education during preschool, and fewer studies have investigated how preschool actually affects children's first and second languages (National Research Council, 1997).

The objective of the study was to investigate if there were any improvements in both the English and Spanish oral expression and comprehension skills of Spanish-speaking, Latino children attending a free preschool catering to a predominantly low-income, Latino and African-American community in Northern Virginia. The teachers of this High Scope-based preschool emphasized English-learning because they believed that a good English background would give the children an advantage in elementary school. But the preschool supported Spanish-speaking in various ways. The children were not discouraged from speaking Spanish. A Spanish-speaking adult was always present in each of the four sites, and Spanish reading materials, toys and music were available. Likewise, in the two sites where the student body was predominantly Latino, the teachers or parents demonstrated how to cook Spanish food and taught Spanish songs. The school also made sure that announcements, flyers, and notices for children's and parents' activities were written in both English and Spanish.

Method

At the start of school year 1995-1996, 20 Latino boys and 28 Latina girls (average age = 4.33) were assessed. Of those children, 18 boys and 25 girls (average age = 4.77) were assessed again at the end of the school year. For comparison purposes, at the end of the school year, African-American children attending the same preschool who spoke only English

and were present during the testing days were also assessed for their English language comprehension and expression. The comparison group included 16 boys and 15 girls (average age = 4.72).

To test the children's oral expression, the PRE-LAS Let's Tell Stories subscale (Duncan & de Avila, 1986, 1987) was used (this instrument was normed on Latino children). For the Latino children, one story was read in English, while the other story was read in Spanish. For the African-American children, only the English stories were read. Using the PRE-LAS pictures, the story was read to the child and a stuffed toy or a puppet similar to the main character in the story was also shown. The child was told that the stuffed toy or puppet only spoke English (or Spanish) and that the child had to retell the story in the language that the stuffed toy/puppet understood. When a child would not talk, the examiner prompted with questions. The same questions were used for every child that required prompting. The children's stories were tape-recorded and transcribed. The order of telling the stories and the language in which they were told were counterbalanced. Each child's story was rated on a 6-point scale (0-5) by two independent, bilingual raters. The PRE-LAS creators adjusted for age, so that the expectations for a 3-year-old were lower than those for a 4-year-old or a 5-year-old.

To test the children's comprehension skills, an examiner read one or two other stories to one or two children at a time, allowing them to see the pictures. Immediately afterwards, each child was individually asked 10 multiple choice questions about each story. For the Latino children, one story was read in English and one in Spanish, or vice versa; and the language sequencing was counterbalanced. For the African-American children, only the English stories were read. The Latino children were given the English and Spanish versions of

four stories: Corduroy, A Pocket for Corduroy (at the beginning of the year), The Little Red Hen and Harry, The Dirty Dog (at the end of the year). The African-American children were given The Little Red Hen and Harry, The Dirty Dog.

Results

There was a significant improvement in the English expression scores of the Spanish-speaking children from Time 1 to Time 2 ($t(30) = -5.57$, $p < .0001$). Their average score at the beginning of the year was .66; whereas, at the end of the year, their average score was 1.66. By comparison, the African-American children had an average score of 2.71 at the end of the year. The difference between the two groups was significant ($F(1,59) = 14.28$, $p < .0001$).

The Spanish expression scores of the Latino children increased but did not significantly improve from Time 1 to Time 2. Likewise, although their English comprehension scores improved from Time 1 to Time 2, the difference did not approach statistical significance. However, at Time 2, the English comprehension scores of the Latino children (M=6.21) were not significantly lower than those of the African-American children (M =7.03; $F(1, 59) = .31$, $p > .10$). This indicated that the English comprehension skills of the Latino children were already near ceiling for their preschool environment at Time 1, which could explain why they did not achieve much improvement afterwards. The children's Spanish comprehension scores declined slightly from Time 1 to Time 2, but this difference was not significant.

Discussion

The following are the implications of this study for the education of Spanish-speaking, Latino children:

a) Preschools which emphasize Latino children's English-learning while simultaneously supporting their Spanish-speaking, can achieve a significant improvement in the children's English oral expression skills within a span of just one school year.

b) Even if they are not able to express themselves well in English, low-income, Spanish-speaking children comprehend nearly as much English as do low-income, native-born, English-speakers.

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